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ESCAPE OF KARNES AND TEAL FROM MATAMOROS.¹

BROOKLYN, N. Y., March 2, 1881.

To H. A. McArdle, Esq., Independence, Texas.

MY DEAR SIR: In compliance with your request, I herein give you some of my reminiscences of Matamoras, connected with the revolutionary struggle of Texas, and not included in what I have heretofore published on the subject; and since commencing the letter I find I have accidentally, but quite appropriately dated it on an anniversary half-forgotten where it ought most to be remembered. In the May number of the *Magazine of American History* for 1879, I narrated the case of the Texan prisoners captured by Urrea at San Patricio and thereabout, and alluded to the detention and escape of the Texan commissioners, Karnes and Teal, whose adventures, I observed, would form an interesting romance, but would be too long to be included in that article. I now propose to relate what was then omitted.

The duty on which those commissioners were sent by the Texan commander, with the sanction of the Mexican general, Filisola, was that of carrying into effect certain forms of a truce entered into

¹The original of this letter has been presented to the Association by Mr. McArdle.—EDITOR QUARTERLY.

between Houston and Santa Anna (the latter a captive), and assented to by Filisola, who was still in the field. Under that agreement Filisola was permitted to retreat unmolested from Texas, with the remains of Santa Anna's forces, and, by the same terms, the commissioners were to receive and conduct back to Texas all prisoners of war then in Matamoros, as well as all escaped slaves who could be found there. The readiness of both sides after the battle of San Jacinto to hold hands off was more excusable on the part of Mexico than of Texas. The latter got lazily rid of an enemy she might have destroyed, while the former profited by the immunity, and dodged the terms left for later fulfillment. It was a new instance of the man who was left to hold the bag.

Filisola was relieved of his command and ordered to the City of Mexico so soon as he had got through the most arduous portion of his retreat, and went to the metropolis without passing through Matamoros, while Urrea, already there, succeeded to the command of the defeated forces. It was not yet officially known what reception the Mexican government had given to Filisola's report of the truce; but no one living in Mexico had any doubt as to what it would prove to be. That government did not openly repudiate the armistice till the benefit to their side was accomplished, and the rest was not.

Karnes and Teal were officers in the service of Texas, who had figured in the late campaign, the former as a captain of volunteer cavalry and a most efficient scout, and the latter as a captain of regular infantry. They were accompanied by their orderlies, two soldiers of Teal's company, and an interpreter, a French resident of Texas, named Victor Loupé. Their flag of truce and passport from General Filisola brought them safe into Matamoros, and they repaired to Proctor's Hotel, where many of the American residents, as well as a number of Mexican officers boarded.

To see for the first time in Matamoros, in the midst of those they had fought against, two San Jacinto officers with shoulder straps of rebel rank, and two soldiers from the same field in rather ungainly uniforms, was a cause of no little sensation. The foreign residents greeted the phenomena with great cordiality. I was at the hotel when they arrived, and happened to be one of the first to salute them; but I threw no immediate damper on the hopes of what I

knew to be a fool's errand. I was struck by the appearance of Karnes, whose robust frame, red hair, and bold Scottish cast of features offered, I thought, a good personation of Rob Roy in his youth. Teal, though of less notable individuality, was as wiry, and more handsome, and of genteel bearing for a lad of frontier breeding. They were soon greeted by a brother officer, then a prisoner at large in Matamoros, Major Miller, who had been captured with his men at Copano, and had narrowly escaped the fate of Fannin. He had been brought thither with the retreating army, and was allowed the freedom of the city bounds. From him and other friends who called the commissioners soon learned that Filisola's pledges were certain to meet with no recognition; and they expressed their readiness to accept whatever ill luck duty had brought upon them.

To the Mexican officers, smarting under recent disaster, the sight of Texan officers and soldiers wearing outward and visible signs of their class and quality was a galling sight, and roused antipathy which the diplomatic position of the commissioners could hardly restrain; but its manifestation did not go beyond muttered threats and hostile but half covert gestures. There was, however, one class of persons to whom the new comers were apparitions of terrible import. The fugitive slaves, of whom there were between fifty and a hundred in the city, soon learned on what errand these Texans had come; and, as they had no longing for the hearth and home of Uncle Tom's cabin, they quaked with fear. Some skulked out of sight; others, I think, bolted to the bush; and one, at least, ran to the nearest barrack and decorated his ragged felt with a borrowed military hat-band. Under the protection of this talisman, which represented the sovereignty of his adopted land, he ventured to walk the streets.

The Mexican officers lost no time in protesting at headquarters against the toleration of any tokens of rank or soldiery in rebels, and advised the prompt suppression of such displays, though it should be only for the safety of the wearers. General Urrea acted on the suggestion. The commissioners had notified him of their arrival; and his first recognition of their presence was an order to doff all military insignia from the persons of themselves and their attendants. It was done; and the Mexican bull became less

irritable when the red flag of the matador was put out of sight. This was the first official affront they received, and it occurred, I think, before the first day ended. It is worthy of recollection, however, that one man from the ranks showed a more manly sign of the freemasonry of the sword. Soon after the new group arrived, the two orderlies met on the street a battered looking Mexican soldier, who, after scanning their baggy uniforms for a moment, accosted them with a sufficiency of pigeon English in his speech to make himself understood. "Soldados Goddammes," he said, "tomorrow we may have to fire bullets at each other; now, while we can, vamos a drinky whisky." The invitation was frankly accepted; but like Santa Anna's truce, it left the advantage on the Mexican side. There was then a general vacuum in the military pockets at Matamoros; and the Texans had to pay for the "whisky." The magnanimity of the veteran may have been merely an old soldier trick.

I have no precise recollection of dates. The commissioners, I think, came in May, and it was just after the defeated army had arrived—probably about the time Urrea relieved Filisola. The commissioners, after a day or two, finding themselves unable to obtain an interview with General Urrea, concluded to address him a note referring to the object of their mission, and requesting that he would enable them to carry it into effect, or give them a definite answer of some kind on the subject. Though they intended to address him in English, they requested me to put their letter into proper shape. I did so, to the best of my ability, and then requested that one of them would copy for their signatures what I had written, as I did not wish it to appear in my handwriting. Karnes made the copy I suggested, but both of the young men had been reared where the schoolmaster was but little abroad; and the letter was so badly penned that, for the credit of Texas, I felt unwilling to let it go in a plight so illegible; so I wrote out the body of the document myself, though in a hand which I attempted to disguise. This was a thing in which I was never very skillful. An Irish spy and striker whom Urrea had picked up recognized my distorted penmanship, and soon after took occasion to inform me of his own smartness and the general's displeasure at the discovery. This incident,

I think, added considerably to the suspicion with which I had begun to be regarded.¹

The letter was answered, but in evasive terms which amounted to nothing; and when the commissioners requested passports to return with they were refused, and were forbidden to leave the place. What Urrea's intentions then were towards them, if he had any, is uncertain. As they had come under a flag of truce, he probably could not bring himself to make prisoners of them at once, and he was afraid to let them go; so he knew not what to do with them. They continued thus as prisoners at large, under surveillance, some weeks. In the meantime the repudiation of Santa Anna's truce was proclaimed, and with it threats of a fresh and speedy invasion of Texas in overwhelming force. This bluster of rumor seemed like the din of a general uprising. The church was to pour out its treasures, and the population to contribute the best of its bone and sinew, brain and blood, for the vindication of national honor. As this game of brag imposed on most of the foreign residents, if not on most of the Mexicans themselves, it is not surprising that it completely deceived the commissioners, and that they were anxious to send promptly to Texas news of the imagined danger. This brought about what you have heard of as the sending of the whip-handle dispatch. I had, as you suppose, some connection with that affair, but was not the principal agent in it. I engaged the courier and suggested the hollow handle of a whip as a place of concealment for papers not likely to be suspected; but I wrote nothing that was sent in the casket I contrived, for I did not approve the kind of news which all the rest concerned insisted on sending. Mr. William Howell, a Philadelphian, and then an extensive wool buyer at Matamoros, took the lead in the undertaking, and bore the expense of it. He was one of the most zealous friends of the cause of Texas in the

¹Since writing this paragraph I have called to mind more vaguely having a few days later written for the signature of the commissioners a letter to General Rusk, which General Urrea permitted them to send by some conveyance which the latter commanded, provided it were sent through him. It was accordingly submitted to him, being in the same disguised hand which had been recognized as mine. Though I do not remember the contents of this letter, it is now my impression that it was this more than the other which caused Urrea's displeasure towards the amanuensis. Memory often comes back to us in dribblets.

place, and the most lavish of his means for its advancement. He was also an intimate friend of mine; but, except in the sympathy referred to, our ideas seldom harmonized. The papers sent in the whip handle were a letter from Captain Teal to General Rusk, and another from Howell not signed, and they were worded more like military orders than suggestions of a subordinate and advice from an unknown friend. "I am not discouraged *atoll*," said Teal. "You *must* work headwork as well as fight. You *must* blow up San Antonio and Goliad"; while Howell wrote, among other sage advice, "Shoot Santa Anna and his officers." I listened to both communications with disgust; for they were shrieks of the same kind of unreasoning panic which had set fire to Gonzales and San Felipe. I had been less imposed on than many of my friends by the Mexican bluster of the season, which I was even then inclined to put into the same category with Henry Smith's threat to carry his conquests to the walls of Mexico, and, though I believed in the possibility of near danger to Texas, and thought she ought to be warned, I had no wish to aid in raising the shepherd boy's sham cry of *wolf*. But my advice was overruled.

Howell put Teal's letter, with corrected orthography, as well as his own, into a very minute and well-disguised back hand. The whip handle was stuffed, and the courier was started. He was a young Mexican, who had already been employed in similar trips, and was considered perfectly trustworthy. He went with speed, and without interruption, till he arrived near the Nueces, where he fell into the hands of Texan scouts, who charged him with being a spy or an enemy's courier, and searched his equipments in every place except the right one for papers. Not finding them, they threatened to hang him up unless he produced dispatches, whether he had any or not; and he plead in vain to be taken to their general. At length, to save his neck, he betrayed the whip handle. Thus the letters intended for General Rusk went into the hands of the roughest and most ignorant scouts, and copies must have been taken by the first readers, for one letter went speedily to the press, which it would never have done through the hands of General Rusk. There was certainly one among the scouts who was sufficiently clerical for such mischief, for he gave the courier an acquittance of his charge by receipting to him for "one whip." I saw the receipt when it

came back, and would have been glad if the signer of it and his companions had truthfully receipted for "one whipping." The receipt was not the only voucher which returned; for in a short time, I think little more than two weeks, Teal's letter came to us in the columns of a New Orleans newspaper. I know not by what exceptional forbearance it was that Howell's communication was not published also. Teal said in his, "We have met with many friends here," but luckily he did not name them; still the incident was a terrible damper to all who had expected ordinary discretion in the people they were endeavoring, at no little risk, to serve.

The whip handle news had the ill effect I had apprehended. Texas for a time was pervaded by panic, and many of the frontier settlers were frightened from their homes, which they had to leave at great sacrifice.

About the time above referred to, a friend who had called on business at headquarters informed me that he had seen lying on General Urrea's office table the number of the *Picayune* which contained Teal's letter, and lying beside it a manuscript translation of the letter into Spanish. It was about this time that Karnes and Teal were suddenly arrested and put into close confinement in one of the regimental barracks. As well as I recollect, this occurred just after Teal's letter came to light through the press, which, if I am right as to time, gave Urrea, to say the least, a plausible justification of his step. In a few days, however, the commissioners were permitted to rent their own prison; that is, they were allowed to hire private quarters, such as could be easily guarded, where they could be confined under the charge of a special detail. Such a squad, under a commissioned officer, was sent each morning to the private quarters to relieve its predecessor,—the two prisoners being permitted to go thrice a day in charge of a file of soldiers to take their meals at the hotel where they had before boarded. Their friends were also allowed to visit and converse with them at any hour of the day. Thus their imprisonment, however irksome, was not very rigid; and I think they were generally treated with courtesy and consideration by the officer of their guard. Their two orderlies, who had been arrested at the same time with themselves, were confined with the San Patricio prisoners in the principal barrack, and remained there till the whole body was released by General

Bravo. In the meantime, apprehensions of the immediate invasion of Texas had died away; and, as a considerable force was kept on foot there, the commissioners no longer felt any dread concerning the safety of their country. Still the thought of escape continually occupied their minds. Major Miller had effected his, and had arrived safe at General Rusk's camp before Karnes and Teal were confined; and they, some time after their transfer to private quarters, were very near making a desperate flitting before any feasible plan could be formed for doing it with a fair prospect of success. They had acquired some knowledge of Spanish; and one evening on their way to supper they ventured to sound the two soldiers who had charge of them, and found them willing to desert, and, for a small consideration, to escort their prisoners out of town before taking their own course of flight. This need not seem strange, for it was at a time when desertion was rife among the half-paid soldiery. The captives could have had no other plan than to cross the river in any manner they could, and make their way on foot as best they might through the arid waste between the Rio Grande and the Nueces. The supper was eaten, and an extra ration from the table put into each pocket; and the prisoners and guards commenced a brisk march towards the country. They had nearly reached the edge of the city when a military patrol, crossing their course, frightened the soldiers, who peremptorily demanded a return to quarters. Thus the attempt failed; but one minor incident connected with it is worthy of mention. On the outward march, when not far from the outskirts, they passed two of the black fugitives from Texas who had been so alarmed by the arrival of the commissioners. "My God, Ben," said one to the other, "the sojers is a takin' 'em out to the bush to shoot 'em." This was the only way in which the negro could account for the direction which guard and prisoners were jointly taking. He spoke with evident horror, and it was very pleasing to the two Texans to meet with such a token of sympathy where it was hardly to be expected, considering the relation in which the commissioners stood towards the runaways. It was one instance of the many which occur of the kindly feeling which the escaped slave can entertain towards the house of bondage and its flesh-pots.

Karnes and Teal continued in this loose kind of custody, I think,

over three months. Among the acquaintances they had made before their imprisonment was Mr. Robert Love, an American, who had a hat manufactory in Matamoros. He took charge of their baggage when they were arrested, and had occasional conferences with them, and often sent messages through me. They were indebted mainly to him for their escape, in arranging for which he was willing to take any risk, and could do it more boldly, as he had fallen less under suspicion than the rest of their friends. He secured a guide, a *ranchero*, older than the whip-handle courier, who for the present wished to avoid dangerous enterprises. When other needful dispositions were made, the program for the first step, or rather the first rush, was fixed on. The quarters occupied by the Texans were a house of one large room opening on the street and having no back yard or rear entrance. It was about midway between the plaza and the nearest edge of the town towards the river, where an old receding of the stream had left a small lagoon. This was beyond the dwellings, but not very far from the quarters. To this place the prisoners were wont to repair under a guard whenever the calls of nature had to be obeyed. It was resolved that on the evening fixed for the escape the guide should repair to this spot early in the evening, ready mounted and leading another saddled horse, and should there await the appearance of the prisoners. They, on their arrival, were to break from the guard and mount, one behind the guide, and the other in the empty saddle, when the horses were to be put to full speed in the safest direction. At Mr. Love's request, I gave information of the plan to the prisoners early in the day by calling at their quarters, when I delivered the message in the fewest words possible, and then without taking a seat took my leave; for a long conversation at this juncture might afterwards seem suspicious. The plan succeeded.

In the evening my ear was on the alert for the beating of a general alarm or some such token that the escape was effected; but I heard none, and began to apprehend failure. If pursuit was made, as it doubtless was, it was done without demonstrations. I remained on the plaza and its vicinity till a late hour. My way thence to my lodging room was past the prisoners' quarters, and in going, after 10 o'clock, I took my usual course past them. The officer of the guard stood at the door, but I saw nothing of the prisoners. I was

passing him with a salutation, when he called to me, and I halted. "Have you seen Don Henrique and his companion this evening?" said he, meaning the two Texans. "No, Señor," I replied, "have they not returned from supper?" "They went to supper," he said, "at the usual hour, and then, as usual, to the *comun*; and the corporal and soldier who escorted them report that, while they were lying down to drink at the water's edge, the two prisoners disappeared. It could not have been a mere trick of the latter, for if so you would probably have met them; it must be an escape." "Yes," said I, "they have doubtless bolted for the bush." "*Seguramente*," he replied, and bidding him good night, I passed on. I had expected closer questioning; and it struck me that the officer took the matter very coolly, when it was certain to involve an arrest and a court-martial for him. I went to my room and to bed; but before falling asleep I heard the foot-steps of a passing guard, and from some stern words that reached me I learned that they had one or more persons in custody. It might be the fugitives, or some one suspected of aiding them; and the thought naturally came up, "It may be my turn next." But the turn did not come; and in the morning I learned that the man arrested was Victor Loupé, the interpreter of the commissioners, who had not shared the imprisonment of his employers. Nothing appeared against him, and he was soon released, and no other foreigner was arrested. Though my conversation with the Texans was probably the last they had with any outsider before their flight, the brevity of the conference must have saved me from being suspected of complicity. It is probable, too, that the safe retention of these men had become a matter of indifference to General Urrea, now that there was no prospect of speedy operations against Texas. Their flitting did not cause a tenth of the excitement which, a year later, after I had left Mexico, followed the escape of Wm. H. Wharton, and led to the arrest of several American residents.

I afterwards learned that Karnes and Teal, on going out to the lagoon, found there the guide, who seemed to be watering his horses. The two prisoners made a show of sky-larking with each other, and in doing it amused, and got further away from, their unvigilant guards, and then made a sudden rush for the horses, mounted, and were off in a moment. If the soldiers fired, it was without effect.

The corporal's story about lying down to drink was no doubt a lame excuse of his own invention. The fugitive group swam the river with their horses, and took refuge a few miles from its northern bank in a thicket which had already been picked out as a safe hiding place, and had been stored with a hidden supply of food; for the plan contemplated an abode there of several days till the first energy of pursuit should be over.

I am again at a loss for dates, but it was in autumn, I think in September, when the escape occurred. Soon after the fugitives took refuge in the thicket the fall rains set in; and, as their hiding-place had no other shelter than what they could improvise, they found the trials of freedom, if more welcome, more of a penance for the present than the accommodations of captivity. The rains for a time so swelled the Arroyo Colorado and so submerged the roads that it was not thought advisable to start on their journey so soon as had been contemplated; and the fugitives had to continue in their bleak bivouac more than two weeks. Their guide did not keep with them most of the time, but visited them daily, to take to them whatever they needed and to give them information. When their baggage was sent over, Mr. Love did not think it advisable to send Captain Teal's uniform and sword, for the accidental discovery of these articles by scouts on the way might interrupt the plan of escape; but Teal continued his entreaty for them so earnestly that Love at length took the risk of sending them. Karnes, not being a regular, had no uniform, nor would he have given it undue importance if he had had one. I afterwards heard the incident referred to quite significantly.

The time at length came when a start was considered feasible, and the trio in due time reached in safety the camp of the army of Texas east of the Nueces, where their arrival called forth great demonstrations of joy.

My story is ended, but it is proper that I should give a parting word to the subsequent lot of the several persons whom I have named. Karnes died about three years after, and was then, I think, in command of a small garrison at San Antonio. Though of humble origin and almost illiterate, he was a man of large brain, by nature a gentleman as well as a soldier, and of the kind of material which in Napoleon's day so often supplied the great leader with field

marshals from the ranks. Teal soon after his escape rose to the command of the regiment to which his company belonged, and at the time of his death was, I think, in temporary command of the army of Texas. He was a half instructed martinet, with none of the tact and discrimination so essential for the command of soldiers among whom mutiny is chronic, owing to lack of pay and of a strong power above them. The result was that he became an object of hatred to his men, and was shot dead one night in his tent by hands which were never identified.¹ The assassin took advantage of a violent storm, and so timed the discharge as to make it simultaneous with a clap of thunder. He fired from without, where, so long as he knew on which side of the tent his victim lay, he could place the muzzle almost in contact with its mark. In the same tent that night lay the Bayard of the early days of Texas, William G. Cooke, who slept unconscious of the murder till it was discovered in the morning.² A few days later, while relating the adventures of Matamoros to one who had been an officer of that short-lived army, I told of Teal's anxiety to secure his uniform for his flight. "That uniform," said the listener, "was the death of him. He was always flaunting it in the eyes of his ragged soldiery, and this brought their animosity up to the killing point."

Major Miller was known to me at a later day as a resident of Victoria, where he long since died. Mr. Love after annexation removed to Texas and settled at Corpus Christi, where I am told he died a few years ago. Mr. Howell, about a year after the above events in Matamoros, lost his life in an attempt to pass from that place to Texas by land under the guidance of the whip-handle courier. Howell bore on his person a large sum in doubloons, which may have become known to his guide. The story told by that man was that they were attacked on the way by banditti, and that Howell was killed, while he escaped; but there was a strong suspicion that the

¹A note inserted at this point, apparently by Mr. McArdle, is as follows: "By John H. Schultz, who so confessed before his execution in Galveston in 1855 for the double murder of Bateman and Jett.—Colonel Fulton in John Henry Brown." What Brown has to say of the matter will be found in his *History of Texas*, II, 135-37.—EDITOR QUARTERLY.

²This does not exactly harmonize with the account given by Colonel Fulton, who was officer of the guard in the Texan camp that night. See note 1 above.—EDITOR QUARTERLY.

guide, notwithstanding his previous fidelity, had been tempted to commit the murder and robbery himself. What became of the interpreter and the two orderlies I know not, but they have probably traveled the same road with the rest. That noble-hearted circle of foreign residents who then fraternized in Matamoros were soon scattered, never again to meet; and one after another they have in the distance dropped or faded from my sight. Of the persons associated with Karnes and Teal in that place I am perhaps the only one living.

As this episode, though unimportant, may be interesting to those who take an interest in the historic stem of which it is a mere twig, it ought perhaps to be preserved by the only one who can now do it; and I do not object to your desire to publish it if you can find in Texas—what I never could—a printer who is intelligent enough to know when he is making a fool of his author,—one who would not be liable to convert *Bowie's apparition* into *Bowie's opposition*.

With a prayer that printer's types may some day become as plain in the meaning they aim at as the types and shadows we hear of in another line of business, I am most truly

Your friend and obedient servant,

R. M. POTTER.

P. S.—Allusions just made remind me that, if this letter be printed, the typographical opportunity may be made use of to say a word about another thing touching me, which was put into a newspaper without asking my consent. Over two years ago, I sent to a gentleman in Texas, at his request, a letter containing an outline of my personal history, it being requested for a use so different from that of making it the basis of a newspaper article that I had no apprehension of such perversion. The substance of it, however, was converted into a communication to the *Galveston News*; and, though no misstatement was aimed at nor made except through the awkward use and alteration of words, the writer and printer between them contrived to evolve an amount of nonsense so great that I wish to plead innocence of it. I heard of the publication by mere accident over two months after it came out; for the writer forgot to send me a copy, as well as to ask my leave. On obtaining the article I read in it with surprise that my father was a native of New Jersey and was born in England, and there I read for the first

time of such things as "imitated rank" and a "second lieutenant-general,"—designations unknown to the Blue Book. Other causes of wonder turned up, but these will suffice. Setting aside blunders, the article seemed so uncalled-for as a subject of interest then and there, that I have thought I might be excused for accounting for its appearance, whenever I could do so without making it the subject of a special communication. The first time I ever saw my own life in print was when I read that number of the *News* of December 12th, 1878, and the sight of it gave me the uncomfortable feeling which a man is said to have on catching a glimpse of his own ghost.

R. M. P.